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ABSTRACT

As exemplified by New Zealand, the nature of educational policy research is shaped by political and social factors that impinge upon the research environment. Following a description of the educational system and research funding methods, this paper analyzes three areas that affect policy research in New Zealand and addresses relevant social science research literature on public policy formation. In regard to the first area, responses from the central government indicate that the minister and his/her political party are able to alter the direction of policy research. The second area concerns the process of agenda setting within the department of education, which is determined by varying perceptions of priorities. Institutional arrangements can create a narrow concept of reform, which has been characteristic of New Zealand's centralized educational system. Policy researchers have neglected to recognize that inherent ethnocentrism in the knowledge legitimation process causes a disjunction among diverse cultural groups. Applied research in Maori culture should derive its focus and concepts from indigeneous interpretations of reality rather than from European academic assumptions. Finally, the operating environment and in particular the influence of labor organizations representing teachers affect research in various ways. The challenge for policy research is to maintain integrity of purpose through an understanding of influential factors. Appended are 26 references. (CJH)

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EDUCATIONAL POLICY RESEARCH IN NEW ZEALAND : ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association

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EDUCATIONAL POLICY RESEARCH IN NEW ZEALAND : ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

The belief that research has a significant role to play in the policy arena has, as noted by several researchers (Eisner, 1984; Florio, Behrmann and Goltz, 1979; and Hocking, 1984) been subject to a considerable amount of scepticism. The growing body of literature which critically examines the relationship between social science research and the policy formation process, highlights the disjunction between what has been described by some analysts as a tension between two cultures (Husen and Kogan 1984). Nevertheless, in a recent paper Eisner (1984), noted that educational research is predicated on the supposition that research is vital to the improvement of educational practice. In the context of an increasing awareness of the need for formal and systematic evaluation and research in New Zealand, the need to understand how and under what conditions research may influence policy is significant.

In addressing some of the issues and challenges associated with the conduct and funding of educational policy research in a multi-cultural society, this paper will outline some of the ways in which the social and political context impacts on the process of agenda setting and the conduct of policy research.

While the New Zealand education system combines elements of national and local, lay and professional influence it is a national system which is centrally funded and to a large extent centrally directed. The high degree of centralisation is reflected in almost all aspects of the system, but in particular at the policy level. Potentially at least, policy research could have a significant impact on education throughout New Zealand.

Not surprisingly however, the difficulties associated with policy research that have been commonly identified are also evident in New Zealand. These include for example, the influence of the Minister (Hocking, 1984) and differences in perspective on, for example, time (Husen and Kogan 1985, Smith 1981, Wirt and Mitchell 1982). In addition some observers (de Groot 1982) have noted that organisation can have a significant and decisive influence on the role played by research.

An examination of the nature and funding of policy research particularly in terms of the wider political and cultural context may suggest how contextual factors affect the policy research undertaken in New Zealand and what challenges they present.

New Zealand spends approximately .1 percent of the money (1.7 billion dollars in 1984) allocated to education on research, the total VOTE (appropriation) for education being the third largest in terms of Government spending after Social Welfare and Health.

Proportionally, the figure for research (which excludes university supported educational research) is approximately one third as much as the United States Department of Education spends on research through, for example, the National Institute of Education (NIE).

An analysis of the anatomy of that funding in New Zealand reveals that the approximately 2 million dollars is used to support the salaries and activities of both the Department of Educations' Research and Statistics division as well as the autonomous New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER).

The two sections of the departments Research and Statistics division are concerned with respectively policy research, which is primarily school and institution based (including the IEA studies), and the collection of demographic statistical information used for activities such as school roll projections and teacher movement analysis. In addition, the department through the external contact research programme, makes available at present approximately $300,000 (1986) to fund policy research and evaluation projects. It is with the latter activity in particular that this paper will be concerned as the operation of this programme mirrors many of the issues involved in educational policy research in New Zealand.

The research programme twice a year receives and reviews both solicited and unsolicited applications for research contracts from social scientists (primarily, but not universally university based) who are interested in policy research. This process is analagous to the National Institute of Education (NIE) request for proposal system (RFP). Applications are reviewed both internally and externally and, in addition, directors of the relevant major policy divisions within the department are requested to assess the proposal in terms of its policy priority. Reviewers comments, together with priority assessments, are submitted with the applications to the Head Office Research Committee (HORC) which consists of senior members from each division and which attempts to assess projects in terms of Departmental priorities.

It should be noted too, that where public funds are used authority for expenditure at a certain level is delegated to officers within the department. However, where the level of support exceeds $40,000 for a project Ministerial approval must be sought and where projects exceed $100,000 both the Minister of Education and Minister of Finance must approve the Director-General entering into a contract with researchers. The link between the government and policy research is thus very direct and very strong.

For all projects that receive final support, contracts with the researcher are established with the requirement that an advisory group be established for the duration of the research. Advisory groups which are required to meet approximately every six months typically include representatives from the department's research and statistics division, teachers unions and community groups where appropriate. For example, research in secondary schools, irrespective of whether focus was on students or teachers, would include a representative from the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association (NZPPTA).

In answering the central question of how contextual factors affect policy research, three sources of influence may be identified in the process of solicitation to funding which are critical in determining the nature of the relationship between research and policy. These include in a parliamentary system, the Minister and his government, the actors in the department, and the research advisory groups including the researcher.

In one sense the fundamental analysis must be in terms of relationships of power and influence. It is not so much simply a matter of whether or not research can impact policy but rather how that impact might be shaped.

We may begin by examining what is perhaps the point where the exercise of power or influence is most obvious. Hocking (1984:9) in the Australian context noting that while a range of pressure

groups constitute the political element in policy research, singled out the role of Minister as being particularly significant.

As the person responsible for ensuring that party policy is implemented, the Minister may have significant influence not only on the impact of research on policy but also on the nature of educational policy debate as defined by current policy research activities.

In the New Zealand context there are a number of examples of the different ways in which the Minister has the capability of significantly influencing the policy research process.

A number of researchers (Hocking; 1981; Husen and Kogan, 1985 and others) have pointed out the difficulties associated in gaining acceptance for research which conflicts with or has implications which are contrary to party political policy. A comparatively recent example in New Zealand of such a case concerned a study on teacher stress (Galloway 1982) which concluded with a number of suggested remedial strategies (including a reduction in class size) which were contrary to the declared positions of the Minister. In a radio interview subsequent to the release of the report the researcher commented on the political inactivity at the policy level which drew sharp rebuke (both verbal and written) from the Minister in the form of

a promise that the researcher would not be likely to obtain funding through the contract research programme again!

Undoubtedly the Minister's reaction had adverse consequences for the researcher, making it extremely difficult for him to pursue his research interests. However, repercussions were also felt in the department. These included a demand that the Minister be provided with full vitaes for all research applications which required his approval, but more importantly perhaps, it affected the nature of the relationship between departmental policy makers and researchers. Scepticism in some cases turned to distrust.

It is clear that in such instances where the Minister was antagonised, the possibility of research having any significant impact on policy would seem to be minimal.

Partly as a consequence of this experience the Minister, in speaking to a gathering of educational researchers, made the following comment:

> Research can often be of much less help to ministers of education than is popularly believed. It is, I suggest, less with the formulation of policy and more with the practice of education that educational researchers should primarily be concerned. After all, it is in schools and other places where people learn that the real work of education takes place. Indeed, we often hear it as a

> criticism that the actual business of learning is much less influenced by changes at the national level than those who make policies would like to believe! (Wellington 1984)

While to some extent the criticism (both explicit and implicit) may be justified, particularly in cases of research of dubious quality, it is the overall message which is significant. Specifically, the belief at that level that policy research is of limited value (and consequently low priority?) and the imperative that reseach efforts should be confined to issues on the classroom level has the potential to impact significantly on the conduct of policy research.

The cited ministerial proclamation might not only have implications for the funding of educational policy research but may also be indicative of an attidude which seeks to shape and delineate the bounds of legitimate policy debate and research.

It could be argued that it was no coincidence that, during the tenure of the Minister in question, the conduct of the research programme was marked by a period of difficulty and a reduction in funding.

It is also apparent that under these conditions a change of government can signal significant changes in the fortunes of the research programme. For example, whereas a recently funded project which had its intellectual origins in the neo-marxist

theories of reproduction and which challenged the egalitarian myth of a classless society in New Zealand, would not have received funding prior to 1982, it was approved after a change to a more liberal government.

Power and influence at the ministerial or governmental level can be seen to operate in a slightly different manner to shape the policy research process in the following example. In 1985 the government introduced amendments to the Education Act which included provision for the inclusion of what is colloquially called "sex education" in the health syllabus. In keeping with what has been described as the political model (Husen and Kogan 1985) the enabling legislation which approved a trial introduction of that component of the syllabus in selected schools included the requirement that a report of an independent evaluation commissioned by the department should be tabled in parliament early in the new year (1986). Because of the contentious nature of the issue the enabling legislation was passed at the end of the second term of the academic year, allowing the last term for the trial and evaluation. Given that schools were to consult with and gain approval of their communities to teach parts or all of the unit, it is not surprising that the conduct of the evaluation was adversely affected. As significant as the lack of appreciation of the requirements of the research process is the implicit belief that research which focused on such things as parental, teacher and student attitudes (and knowledge) would provide answers to what

is essentially a question of values - should we teach sex education in schools? Normative questions which involve implicit value systems, can not be answered solely on empirical grounds. The political requirement (legislated) for the evaluation clearly has an impact on the nature of educational policy research and, in this case, the subsequent debate. Furthermore, not only did the legislature demonstrate little understanding of the requirements of sound research but also, as the final decision has been delayed, they could be accused of using the research as a means of delaying the process of decison making.

The impact of political prophylaxis may also be seen at the departmental level. The influence of contextual factors in the process of shaping the nature of policy debate operates in a slightly different manner within the Department of Education. In circumstances where the applications for funding typically exceed the financial resources available, the process of selecting projects which are to be funded is critical in understanding how the way in which research impacts on policy may be shaped by organisational elements.

Husen and Kogan (1985) speculate that a high degree of centralisation might strengthen efforts to mobilise research for decision making and may ensure that the nature of the research undertaken is tailored to the needs of decision makers. Both assumptions are correct to a certain extent in the New Zealand context and it is precisley for that reason that there is

a need to understand the factors which operate in the context of the department which affect the research undertaken.

The process of agenda setting (for both internal and external projects) is undoubtedly influenced in broad terms by pressure groups and party (governmental) policy. However, it is also influenced by the professional concerns of the officers in each division and is shaped by their perceptions of what the current issues are and by their understanding of the nature of social science research.

In part the funding of projects is determined by the degree of success divisions have in getting approval for new policies submissions to government which include the provision of a specified amount for research or evaluation. What is apparent is that during the process of agenda setting where by definition certain issues will be excluded, there is a need to be aware of the process of legitimation (which may be unconscious) that operates. That is, it is clearly more comfortable to select and support those issues which do not challenge in a fundamental way the policies and practices (the ideology) of an organisation. This fundamental dilemma arises from a belief held by some that the department should not be seen to be sponsoring research which has the potential to be embarrassing to the Minister and yet it is those issues which perhaps should have the highest priority. Reform is unlikely to flourish in an environment where it is

difficult to question in a fundamental way the existence and operation of current policies and practice.

In practice this was recently reflected in the reluctance to continue with a research project in the area of learning disabilities because the LD label was no longer 'officially' recognised.

The question of policy makers advancing research in one area rather than another raises the question of legitimation in the process of social science knowledge production. Stanfield (1985) in a paper on the ethnocentric basis of social science knowledge production, argues for the need to recognise ethnocultural diversity in the knowledge legitimation process. This dimension of the issue is nowhere more relevant than with respect to research with minority groups in general, and with respect to Maori groups in particular in New Zealand.

The nature of this challenge for policy research in New Zealand is articulated in a paper by Stokes (1985). The issue which is rooted in a search for self determination is expressed by Stokes in terms of the Maori attitude to knowledge and a social science which imperfectly recognises a differentiation of experience and priorities. To be explicit, Stokes (1985) notes for example that the detached 'academic' stance typical of much of the research with the constraints and methodology of existing university disciplines is unlikely to be well received and is unlikely to

have much chance to succeed in the current social climate. In addition to requiring individuals who are comfortable in both cultures and the expectation that the researcher is already well versed in Maori protocol, it is assumed that contact and credibility will have been established through participation in community affairs (*he kanohi* - face that is seen).

In a recently funded study which is examining the role of pre-school socialisation of Pakeha (children of European descent) Maori and Samoan children in the acquisition of literacy, recognition of these concerns involved a formal ceremony where 'elders' from the various community groups who were on the advisory group ceremonially 'blessed' the project. More importantly perhaps 'ownership' of the project was shared by according co-principal investigator status to a Maori researcher and including an additional set of research objectives which were derived from Maori concerns.

Clearly these expectations have practical implication for the way in which policy research is conducted. More fundamental perhaps is the difference between euro-dominant and Maori attitudes towards knowledge. In addition to the fact that cognisance needs to be given to such concepts as *wairua* and *tapu* (public and private knowledge) and the obvious implication that has for those who seek information, as importantly, it must also be recognised that interpretation of Maori data must be perceived in Maori

terms, not forced into preconceived Pakeha methodologies or systems of categorising knowledge. (Stokes 1985:8)

In other words, it is Maori perceptions of reality rather than internalised or imposed euro-cultural perceptions that need to take precedence in the knowledge legitimation process. This implies that the terms of reference and the focus of research need to originate with the people who have knowledge and experience of the Maori.

The extent to which these concerns have implications for policy research are even more clearly reflected in a recently completed evaluation of an innovative programme of direct community funding directed at 'Youth at Risk'.

The Community Education Initiatives Schemes (CEIS) were established as a result of a government report on gangs which resulted in the government making available block grants for a period of two years to three communities. The distribution of money so provided was to be the responsibility of self appointed management groups in the three communities and was intended to be used to provide training and educational programmes for youth at risk. As part of the scheme it was intended that all aspects of the programme should be evaluated.

Goals and objectives for the evaluation were determined by an inter-departmental committee and following a request for proposals two university groups of researchers were selected to ccnduct the evaluation which involved communities in two parts of the country.

The two communities in Auckland (which had a majority of Maori and Pacific Islanders) refused to work with one of the teams because of the assistance they had previously provided to the Police in the conduct of a survey. While another base for the research was found in Auckland the principal research team resided in a community some 327 miles distant. While distance per se was undoubtedly a factor in some of the subsequent difficulties that arose with the evaluation (including at one stage a threatened refusal to continue in any way to co-operate with the evaluators) it was also evident that the community perceptions of the nature and purpose of the evaluation and the role of the researchers (field workers) was quite different from that held by the academics. This disjunction had an impact on the evaluation in several ways. One of the local field workers operated in effect as a community advocate, the terms of the evaluation were in effect re-negotiated and at the point where the project was about to collapse it was in large part the intervention of a person who was acceptable as being aware of Maori and Island needs who rescued the project. As the researchers noted:

- It soon became apparent that the evaluation process itself was going to be contentious. Explanation lies to quite a degree in the different expectations held by the different parties - the communities, the interdepartmental committee, the MCSS and Massey University - and in the misconceptions of each others' roles from time to time. The Massey team's 'academic research' orientation contrasted (or was though to contrast) with the 'community development' orientation of MCSS and the 'practical concerns and interests' of the Auckland communities. As well, there was some difference over the extent and nature of field-worker roles and whether field-workers were agents of the research team or catalysts helping to develop community capabilities in formative self-evaluation. For their parts some of the communities were understandably unsure whether the evaluators would presume to play judge and jury.

- Furthermore, there was real concern in the communities over possible loss of control over information, over access to the power holders and over ultimately having a place at the decision-making table. If safeguards were not erected the CEIS committee thought the evaluators might insert themselves into the relationship between the communities and government and usurp their position.

- Such tensions not only made the process of evaluation itself a regular focus of concern but also liable for reconsideration and re-clarification from time to time as issues of formative versus summative evaluation were raised. It is fair to say that the desire expressed by some for formative evaluations (to help projects as they developed) was never quite reconciled with (i) the time available, (ii) methodological difficulties of 'cause-effect' studies and (iii) the regular pressure for a summative-type report that would facilitate political decision making. (CEIS 1986 pp 55-58)

Clearly a number of factors associated with good (or ideal) research practice were violated, and I believe that to a large extent the difficulties associated with the project can be attributed to the policy reseach context in which the project had its origins (eg government sponsored, short time lines). However, it is arguable that many of the difficulties associated with this project were due to differences in perspective which may be attributable to the ethnocultural, ethnocentric basis of this evaluation.

It is clear that despite an increased cultural sensitivity as reflected in major policy developments such as the recognition of Maori culture and language in the curriculum (taha Maori) there is a need, in an institution which is an artifact of European

culture, to be aware of the unconscious institutional ways of operating which may exclude the concerns of minority groups.

Undoubtedly, the project cited above also serves as an example of the final dimension of context that I wish to discuss, the community. For the purposes of this paper I would wish to include and focus on the advisory groups in this context as they typically represented 'community' in terms of many of the vested interest groups.

Smith (1981) and others have made the observation that policy matters are ultimately political and that the potential impact of research may be tempered by decisions which have little to do with research findings and more to do with politics. While clearly there are examples of this in New Zealand, I would wish to argue that the advisory groups are a context where 'politics' in another sense has the power to shape and influence the nature and eventual impact of policy research.

Advisory groups are established to assist the researcher in the execution of the research project and typically include individuals who represent teacher unions (kindergarten, primary and secondary), regional representatives of the Department of Education, a departmental representative from the 'host' division and a member of the research and statistics division.

Because of a fairly strong tradition of unionism in New Zealand and the fact that the education system is highly centralised, it should not be surprising that teacher professional concerns do not always coincide with departmental priorities and objectives. The challenge for policy research is to maintain its focus while being sensitive to the professional concerns of teachers.

The potential for a union political agenda to influence the nature of policy research was reflected in a project which was to examine the impact of intermediate schools on Maori children.

Intermediate schools cater for children in the last two years of primary schooling up to age 12 and were established to take advantage of the enhanced resources which accrue to larger schools. Half of the intermediate school population moves on to high school each year and it was argued by a local community group that this process was detrimental to Maori groups in particular as it violated their extended family concept (siblings would be separated). When an advisory group was established to discuss at a very early stage the nature of any research that might be undertaken, a vigorous protest arose from the relevant teachers association. The intermediate school system contains positions at the top of the career structure for primary trained teachers! It was clear that research which in any way might have implications for the continuation (or modification) of the intermediate school system would be unlikely to receive the

support and co-operation of the professional organisations and by implication its membership.

While in fact most of the interaction with teacher professional organisations is co-operative, it is clear that this dimension can also have a significant impact on policy research. The success of many policy projects depends on representatives from the various teacher organisations embracing a project. This usually means compromise but, on the other hand, aids in securing commitment.

In this paper an attempt has been made to explore some of the contextual factors which in New Zealand have a role in shaping the nature and impact of educational policy research. In the first instance it was argued that the nature, scope and impact of policy research is not immune to the vagaries of political influence at the governmental level. Similarly organisational features including in particular the high degree of centralisation may structure the programme of research in such a way as to limit the way in which reform is conceived. Rather than suggesting that there is a deliberate process of shaping perceptions, it is argued that through the institutional arrangments which includes the process of funding, conducting and dissemination of policy research, the possibilities for reform may be more narrowly conceived.

The challenge in recognising the way in which institutional arrangements shape the policy research process is to avoid what Lukes (1974:24) has described as the most invidious exercise of power:

> to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it.

Finally, it was pointed out that the operating environment and in particular the influence of labour organisations representing teachers may also have an impact on research. The challenge for policy research with any commitment to reform is to maintain its integrity of purpose in an environment where political and cultural contextual factors may play a significant role in execution and outcome. It is an understanding of these factors which may help recognise the conditions under which reform is possible.

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